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Feminism Between Existence and Fear: Religious Concealment in Territories of Fear by Fadila Al-Faruq, A Thematic Approach

Dr. Amel Khelaifia, University of Larbi Ben M'hidi, Oum El Bouaghi, Algeria
khelaifaimele@gmail.com

Dr. Aoues Elwardi, University of Abbas Laghrour, Khenchela, Algeria
dodo.wardi40@gmail.com

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Abstract:

The intended aim of shedding light on the traditions and conventions of conservative Arab society within the dynamics of family relations, particularly concerning women, and subjecting them to pressure, repression, and confinement under the pretext of religion, is to illuminate the rampant deviance and absence of familial justice. This is achieved by relying on thematic criticism as a foundational methodology, and by clarifying the effective and salvific outcomes that guarantee different women's rights. In addition, through a profound lexical and linguistic dive into different themes and causes of fear and pain, the very factors that stifle the dreams of the Arab women in the Middle East, the novelist Fadila Al-Faruq, through her narrative discourse, seeks to gather the fragments of a confined feminism. Accordingly, this article's primary aim is to unveil the hidden realities of Eve's gender under the weight of coercive crime, that confine women under religious and social compulsion, excluding them from participating in the human project of life-building that guarantees her a dignified existence and freedom from regressive backwardness.

Keywords: Thematic Criticism; Religious Extremism Against Women.

Introduction

The Arab world continues to marginalize women, who endure a deplorable situation fraught with ambiguity and fragmentation, under an authoritarian system that reduces them to a mere morsel, viewed through a lens of deficiency. This is most evident in the ongoing events that form the current of Middle Eastern affairs, a region targeted by the West. Consequently, within these conservative families, the woman is systematically restrained beneath the weight of social and religious superstructures that deny her freedom of thought and aspiration. This is precisely what Fadila Al-Faruq highlighted and focused on in her thematic historical novel, striving to resolve the stark and rigid conflict between man and the imprisoned woman, which considered as a conflict justified by prohibitions that subject her body to threat, abuse, and the mutilation of its parts suspected of adultery, all at the hands of a religious husband. Also, Fadila Al-Faruq addresses the issue of integration between settled Arab families and returning Arab immigrant families. Here, principles, behaviours, customs, food, drink, and clothing diverge, in which some have embraced Christianity, while others cling to Islam, refusing to compromise the teachings of Sharia and the Sunnah. In this context, Fadila Al-Faruq adeptly conveyed her message through the protagonist, Margaret, weaving the knot of her narrative discourse through themes of rebellion and defiance, among the rejecters, the threatened, the mocked, and the indifferent. In this clash, a language of jealousy and competition emerges among women: the committed versus the free/ liberated. Yet, as psychological studies concerning women have confirmed, she inherently tends to establish a family without frivolity, for she is innately fashioned by her femininity to love and nurture children. By nature, woman is seen as the guardian of her home in the domestic sphere, while the man is charged with the external sphere, providing for the material needs of the family. In this sense, this complex framework raises a central problem that drives the present study about clarifying the most significant difficulties obstructing the path of the Arab woman:

What are the critical junctures and the harmful and aberrant behaviours that have subjected Arab feminism to the pressures of intimidation, threat, and extremism, whether under the guise of conservatism and religiosity, or through an exaggerated, inflated narrative aimed at provocation and domination?

As for the subjective motivation for selecting this topic, it stems from the universal fact that a woman's struggles with her husband and his family are shared common ground, whether she is a working woman or a homemaker. Academically speaking, it is crucial to note that human existence is inherently fraught with a profusely flowing thematic crisis, shifting from a familial to a socio-political realm, all scrutinized through the rigid filters of religion and doctrine. This imposed adherence often demands concealment intermittently, driven by a fear of losing the customs and heritage of the Arab civilizations. Accordingly, and to broaden the benefit, the study adopts the thematic critical approach, as it is most suited to issues of religiosity and the hereditary sequence between individuals, and to the study of the Arab family through what can be termed a discourse of feminist memory, encompassing hobbies, belonging, and the rooting in race and nationality. Among the desired results of this research is to clarify the most successful ways and methods for crystallizing and adapting the exacerbated situation, ultimately leading to a perspective that breaks the shackles of the Arab woman from the oppression of man and the customs of conservative families, to establishing her as an individual with the right to coexist within the human framework under the law of respect, compassion, and intellectual and cultural contribution in a civilized manner. Accordingly, by resisting inherited customs that hinder her progress, the Arab woman can contribute to build a balanced society, the one that dissolves isolation and restores the collective harmony long obscured by repression and fear.

Thematic Criticism

The thematic approach is considered one of the most critical methods in modern literary criticism for examining society and the family, employed by specialist critics and analysts of literary production. It is driven by an instinct to resolve problems and unspoken relationships that lie beneath the surface of the external world. Thus, its central subject is often the study of substructure requiring treatment through the integration of the psychological state with the existential condition, within a framework of communication and persuasion that addresses individual struggles. In this paper, this approach was dedicated specifically to the female gender, singularizing woman as the vital cell of reproduction and proliferation. In this context, it is through her that a child is born and primarily nurtured according to the principles of its mother, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. Furthermore, she is the support that steadies a man in his hour of need, a sanctuary to which he turns for solace and the alleviation of his pain through tenderness and compassion. Accordingly, Hamid Lahmidani defined the formula of thematics as he noted that the literary text manifests in literary creativity through its unique magic, for the creative writer is not led to his themes by his conscious faculties alone; more accurately, he is drawn to them by a force whose hidden nature he does not always comprehend. Also, the writer does not always grasp the secrets of his own creation, and the adventure of criticism aspires to unveil the mysteries of this hidden attraction within the text, where diverse themes proliferate, intersect, clash, appear, and vanish¹. (Lahmidani, 1990, p. 3).

In addition, to bring these thematic qualities to the surface and illuminate the writer's prowess, many scholars engage in a comprehensive detailing of the creator's subject matter. Hence, since expertise is preceded by innate talent, critics devote meticulous attentions to every opportunity presented by the novel, as a literary genre, which is considered as a discourse that engages the contemporary, offering a spacious realm that helps the reader understand the external society through the textual society, and replete with social contradictions, a break from monotony and a novelistic modeling of the familial-linguistic structure. To this end, it is through such type of writings that readers can perceive the pulse of real communities, their struggles, inequalities, and aspirations.

Moreover, Junaidi stated that the concept of thematic criticism is determined by defining the *theme* within the critical field, in which he explains one thematic critic, through outlining the boundaries of the theme in the realized work, which often stems from the authors both childhood stage and the stored memory they summon in their literary creations². (Junaidi, 2009, p. 604). Within this critical framework, it is notably evident that the Algerian novelist Fadila Al-Faruq, in her selection of this narrative titled *Terretories of Fear*, which dedicates the largest portion of its subject to war, oppression and gender in the contemporary Middle East that was victimized by West's geopolitical agendas. By weaving the private theme of womanhood into broader geopolitical and religious conflicts, she reveals how women's bodies become contested sites of ideology, spirituality, and control through integrating the theme of woman into sensitive focal points. Thus, she has chosen a unique

¹ Lahmidani, Hamid (1990, 2014). *The Charm of Theme: Thematic Criticism in the Novel and Poetry*, 1st & 2nd eds., SAL Studies for Semiotic, Literary, and Linguistic Research, Fez, Morocco.

² Junaidi, Radwan. (2009). *Thematic Criticism (Foundations and Procedures)*, Journal of Scientific Horizons, University Center of Tamanrasset, Algeria, vol. 11, issue 4.

character distinguished by ambition, intelligence, and a refusal to yield to regressive emergence in religious matters, which, in the author's view, are a matter of choice, not coercion.

Furthermore, her purpose was not to promote moral rebellion but rather to reassert the human rights of Arab women as a whole by advocating compassion, empathy, and mutual respect between men and women. This is particularly seen in the dynamic between the working woman and her counterpart the traditional housebound woman; the latter was often characterized by cruelty and a stern desire for control under the pretext of preserving traditions. For the most part, this poses an obstacle to the thinking of the intellectually liberated woman, who values freedom of opinion and expression without infringing upon the dignity of the Other (represented by religion) and the decorum of the family. The former seeks autonomy and self-expression, she is a symbol of a conscious woman who can distinguish merits from harms, and the suitable from the unsuitable. Even if she migrates and travels, she remains marked by the theme of authenticity, far from the stubbornness and extremism that characterize a persona artificially cloaked in fake religiosity, a facade whose consequences are regrettable and which is in dire need of relaxation, a relinquishing of some prejudice, and a desire for control. This persona urgently requires softening, dialogue, and discussion in an intellectual and religious atmosphere of mutual understanding, affection, and respect, through sound morality and innate disposition characterized by compassion within defined boundaries. This defines the relationship between the educated Christian woman and the committed religious Arab woman, which is also the case of the Arab Muslim man abroad and his interaction with his Christian wife; who understands and respects the matter of religiosity for its adherents. Thus, this is what is termed respect for the principle of faith and belief, far from insult and the degradation of circumstance.

All of these were presented by the novel's female characters who embody these conflicts in tangible ways. One was the Christian Lebanese protagonist Marguerite and her Muslim sister-in-law Shahd (the self-appointed arbiter of the Mansour family's Muslim code of conduct), and the second was with Margaret's transient attachment to her husband, Iyad, in American exile. This is followed by the disappearance of that positive energy between them upon his return to Beirut, as he reverts to his family's inherited Muslim conventions, through becoming a withdrawn and indifferent husband. This serves as a pertinent exemplar for the Thematic Criticism methods, which is a synthesis of prose literary texts by its nature. Its features are distinct, clear, and varied in their qualitative meaning and symbolism, exerting the direct influence on the main subject of the narrative. Also, the language itself embodies the theme of the woman and her interiority, which permeates the whole text, whose structure is activated by a harmony of meaning and a coherence of form, where semantic depth and syntactic architecture are inextricably attached and combined.

Regarding the profound connection between the literary text and the reader's imagination, the text finds a coherent passage through its enigmas and allure, through functioning as a linguistic genre that merges seamlessly with the thematic approach. It is around this thematic subject that the theorist will examine conclusions drawn from the author's linguistic experiments, which are shaped by their intellectual environment and sense of belonging. Within the novel, the woman has emerged through her actions and the narrative tone during times of rebellion and bigotry, and becomes a resonant echo of the feminine gender, and a scream constrained by introversion. As the critic Mahdan (2021) noted that Fadila Al-Faruq's *Territories of Fear*, reflects a female narrative experience that crystallizes and articulates a discourse concerning issues of violence against women and the taboo of sexuality within the fictional narrative imagination, through treating them as cultural and social patterns long considered unspeakable. Thus, the novel raises several questions regarding its expression of domestic violence and its provocative treatment of sexuality as a means to impact the reader³ (p. 483). Accordingly, it becomes a site for probing the inner recesses of the psyche because the novel is embedded within the discourse of the self, exploring the woman's inner imaginings and making her psyche a subject for discussion, all within the framework of thematics. The latter shaped novel's nature to be diversified through its dialect, voice, plot, and spatiotemporal setting, all of which are brought to life by characters who are dynamic and evolving, shaping the societal text of the critical thematic discourse.

Furthermore, both the superstructure and substructure of the theme of fear are rich with a didactic mission, woven through a network of socio-psychological solutions aimed at liberating women from the shackles of coercion, humiliation, and punitive shaming. Once a woman acquires the qualifications that allow her to be a symbol of her era, she becomes imbued with a culture of full awareness, both towards her female rival and towards the man who serves as her refuge, the presence on whom she was inherently accustomed to rely, for he is the body from which she emerged. According to Hassan (1990), objective consciousness is an awareness of the self and the world, and the relationship between the self and the world. This triangle of consciousness is what makes objective awareness deeply linked to philosophical consciousness⁴ (p.13). In other words, it is the existential formation that is composed of frameworks and systems rooted in the inductive and deductive

³ Mahdan, Leila., et al., (2021). *The Contemporary Algerian Women's Novel*, 1st ed., Alpha for Documentation, Amman, Jordan.

⁴ Hassan, Abdelkarim. (1990). *The Objective Method: Theory and Application*, 1st ed., University School for Studies, Publishing & Distribution, Beirut, Lebanon.

assertions about humankind, as a creature governed by the philosophy of existence and the necessity of self-awareness, embodied in both the hidden inner-self and the known outer-self.

In particular, a woman holds a unique existential function within the family entity, for she is the nucleus of its formation and lineage and its very existence. It is here, precisely, that the research objective reveals its paramount significance: to protect womanhood's sanctities, to empower her core by loosening the binds of violent oppression and the infliction of pain upon her, and to distance her from regressive traditions that deprive her of the joy of living and imprison her in a tragic state. This is achieved by dismantling the policy of familial violation and devastation, a policy whose core subject, in the issues of our present day, is woman.

Religious Extremism

The issue of violence against women has long constituted a pervasive social problem within both the familial and professional spheres, that is, within the family and the workplace, as woman navigates interactions with both allies and adversaries including relatives and family, as well as friends and acquaintances from among others. In this context, Fadila Al-Faruq established a foundational narrative for the Algerian novel with a spirit characterized by a love of belonging to the Arab world, through her choice of a soft and emotional protagonist. This character, Margaret, is defined by her flexibility and eloquence in giving, possessing a sensitive nature. She is the protagonist who drives all the events of the novel. She arrived from American exile after years of absence alongside her husband Iyad, a man of Islamic origins. The Christian wife, Margaret, scarcely has a moment to share with his family before becoming immersed in their affairs, as if she was the cause of every conflict and pain that befalls the renowned and well-known Al-Mansour family in their community. It is here, in this family, that she encounters the scourge of violence and oppression against feminism. The liberated Margaret does not acquiesce to their ideas and views. This aligns with Al-Faruq's viewpoint, as noted by Mahdan (2021), that liberation in their view is manifested in criticizing the beliefs and traditions that hinder women's activity across all different spheres, especially within societies described as backward compared to the developed European Christian societies⁵ (p. 484). Through her ideological narrative discourse, Fadila Al-Faruq articulated themes of vigorous application and social imprisonment imposed on the aspirations of the free and educated woman, by intimidating and oppressing her in the name of family tradition in the Arab East. There is no glimmer of hope or optimism appears from the very beginning. Thus, Margaret lamented, saying: "I came with my husband Iyad, who decided to return permanently to Lebanon after spending seventeen years in New York. I had decided to build a family with him, to revive my Lebanese roots; but I quickly changed my mind, I found myself swimming in a fog of cultural and intellectual shocks with some members of his family. Then, I discovered a different Iyad, not the one I knew in New York. His sister, Shahd, never ceases to deliver her tiresome sermons about the virtues of Islam, and urging me to convert. Whenever she visits us, she brings me a piece of clothing as a gift, ensuring it is modest, with long sleeves and a length that covers below the knees."⁶ (Al-Faruq, 2021, p. 9-10).

This reveals the main rupture that shaped the persistent obstacle in Margaret's life through which she experienced an acute psychological crisis, the problem quickly drawing red lines that categorized her as an outsider. Having lived in America as a Christian of Lebanese Arab origin, she was at odds with her surroundings. Also, she lost almost her entire family in the suicide attack in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, in the early years of the 2000s, and she did not want to be permanently dragged into the worldview of the Al-Mansour family, especially as she adheres to a religion other than Islam. Shahd was her primary complex from the very first moment, because in Margaret's view, she imposed something beyond her will capacities.

Furthermore, feminism in the novel appears as a distinct theme which provides an interpretation of Fadila Al-Faruq's vision, through representing one of the hidden aspects channelled through writing as an outlet for repressed thoughts. According to Maqfouda (2009), it addresses a host of symptoms of backwardness, manifestations of injustice and inequity. Among the problems raised is the issue of women, this ancient yet renewed issue; it is an urgent and open question often raised in ways so contradictory that; while some opinions insist on women's obligation to remain at home and to wear the hijab (the veil), other voices rise to tear apart that black garment and launch into work and participation in life side-by-side with their fellow men⁷ (p. 10). This latter position should exist within a framework of respect mandated by humanistic principles for all religions within the human system. Thus, the aversion to and rejection of violence, as it is antithetical to feminism and violates the sanctity of her body which has value and dignity. It demands cooperation and coordination between women and men, which allows them to contribute as two complementary parts of a whole, whose collaboration develops the environment intellectually and culturally.

⁵ Mahdan, Leila., et al., (2021). *The Contemporary Algerian Women's Novel*, 1st ed., Alpha for Documentation, Amman, Jordan, p.484

⁶ Al-Faruq, Fadila. (2021). *Territories of Fear, A Novel*. Today Publications, Setif, Algeria, p 9-10

⁷ Maqfouda, Saleh. (2009). *Woman in the Algerian Novel* (1st ed.). National Fund for the Promotion of Arts and Letters, Biskra, Algeria, p 10

Meanwhile, the suffering of Margaret (who is a Lebanese Christian woman) with her sister-in-law Shahd (the committed Muslim) intensifies day by day. She confessed, wringing her hands in despair: “The strange thing about Al-Mansours is their speed in changing colours. Only Shahd has one stern face and lives her life as if she was a high-ranking military officer. As for the rest; Hajj Wahb, who diligently prays, fasts, and kisses his mother's hands, loves women more than anything in the world, and his wife who stumbles like a spoon amidst his affairs.”⁸ (Al-Faruq, 2021, p. 14).

Moreover, Margaret is worn down by the excessive clinging of Shahd who holds a dominant position in the family due to her strong and controlling personality. This personality is fortified by opulent religiosity and lavish wealth, which in Margaret's opinion is mere performance, not inner truth; a facade hiding a host of flaws beneath veils of luxury. According to Margaret, Shahd is in need of some compassion and flexibility rather than rigid severity and cruelty. Thus, a fascinating thematic analysis unfolds, chronicling the educated and free feminist who was shackled by suffering and a fear of this difficult existence, of the intense and thorny concealment. Accordingly, Margaret spoke as if liberating a newspaper article, fitting the voice her former profession as a journalist from her years in American exile:

“It is true she covers her head with a scarf and wears a long coat that covers her entire body, with stockings in summer and winter; but the scarf is of luxurious silk bearing the signature of the world's renowned fashion designer. The coat is made of an exquisite fabric, designed and tailored specifically for her by one of Beirut's famous couturiers. Her shoes cost the equivalent of a full month's salary for one of her husband's employees, and her handbags are kind of masterpieces in themselves. As for her jewelry, if sold at a public auction, it could solve all the problems of the children in the refugee camps and poor neighborhoods across Lebanon.”⁹ (Al-Faruq, *Territories of Fear*, p. 11-12).

This reveals a clear dissonance, an imbalance and lack of seriousness in embracing religion in thought, spirit, and rational practice. Paradoxically, we find Shahd to be religious, yet somewhat miserly. It is essential for the devout to harmonize their principles with their material reality, not neglecting the payment of alms (Zakat) and charity, to be generous and not stingy, giving from their wealth to the poor, especially when it comes to the needy and the working classes who are longing for food, aid, clothing, housing, and healthcare, far from a life of tragedy and despair. In this sense, Fadila Al-Faruq introduced a new meaning, donned by wealthy elites in the garb of ostentation, discipline, and strictness, amidst a harsh extremism which is represented by the avarice of some, like the specimen Shahd. They pray, yet live in opulence where the price of a single garment for their pious bodies equals months of salaries for their own servants, and even more. This linguistic-thematic event can be paradoxically termed the formal constraint of a sovereignty without qualification, a rule without established legal authority, a superficial falsity in the superstructure devoid of the foundational substructure, which mandates generosity, kindness, charity, especially Zakat as a pillar of Islam. The evidence for this is the avoidance of a *drip-feed* policy by a devout and committed Muslim either men or women.

In addition, one of the most prominent issues of exhaustion and pain, suppressed in the depths of the *social woman* is her consideration as a marginal figure in a masculine culture that views women stereotypically, as if created solely for the comfort of the center/the male. As Saleh (2015) noted that they are concerned with the image of women in popular proverbs; because proverbs, whether produced by men or women, reflect the power dynamics within society, where women are the weakest link and tend to favour the dominance of a masculine culture; where the man is the strongest, the beginning and the end¹⁰ (p. 150). Furthermore, for the comfort of man, other deeply rooted signs emerge from the core of history that has preserved norms that operate against the ease and dignity of women, founded on the belief she was created from his complete rib. Thus, she is a feminine part of a masculine origin over which he has guardianship. Therefore, when a devout and wealthy female like Shahd exerts control over an educated Christian woman like Margaret, treating her as a rival by casting blame and reproach upon her with a look of scorn and inferiority, the violence becomes doubly painful: a woman was humiliated by another woman, not by a man. Margaret remains antagonized and oppressed, with a bitterness and pain that fuel her increased stubbornness and refusal to submit and to live under Shahd's terrible state of domination.

She said with astonishment and a sense of decay that hints at what is hidden behind Shahd's veiled appearance: “For Shahd, of whom nothing is visible but her face and hands, is the mastermind and the heart of Al-Mansour family. Maybe, this is not only due to the strength of her personality, but also to her husband's wealth, Hajj Abdullah, who granted her the power of money. He is a cloth merchant with several major shops all over Lebanon for men's clothing. On every trip to London, Milan, or India, he brings her luxurious gifts that increase her social weight in her narrow Lebanese milieu, which places a great importance on appearances.”¹¹ (Al-Faruq, 2021, p. 11). Thus, Al-Faruq intentionally focused on transforming Margaret's character into a critic who is presenting the pivotal knot distinguishing the harmful and undesirable aspect of in this oppressive

⁸ Al-Faruq, Fadila. (2021). *Territories of Fear*, A Novel. Today Publications, Setif, Algeria, p 14

⁹ Al-Faruq, Fadila. (2021). *Territories of Fear*, A Novel. Today Publications, Setif, Algeria, p 11-12

¹⁰ Saleh, Howaida. (2015). *The Social Margin in Literature: A Socio-Cultural Reading*, (1st ed.). Vision for Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, Egypt, p 150

¹¹ Al-Faruq, Fadila. (2021). *Territories of Fear*, A Novel. Today Publications, Setif, Algeria, p 11

dynamic. Similarly, Shahd, with her status, wealth, religiosity, and extremism, seldom fulfils in her dealings anything but her desires for false ostentation as an unloved trait, for necessity demands that one's inner self be reflected in their outer appearance. Herein lies the provocative knot for Margaret that shakes her feelings, which she described as stinginess, hypocrisy, wealth, and luxury, all of which are incompatible with the sanctity of the Islamic religion, which calls for compassion and charity. Despite her Christian faith, Margaret inclined towards the universal humanistic principles that unite all religions: respecting the principles of others as beliefs and aiding the needy and those affected by war and poverty, is considered a common characteristic shared by all religions. In this sense, avoiding false and erroneous religious hypocrisy, which requires a sincere soul, a heart, and a spirit free from deception and far from all different vulgar traits of deceptive appearances; necessitates education, foundational grounding, and instruction in the quality of spiritual and faithful human brotherhood.

Furthermore, one of the most prominent manifestations of religious extremism within the conservative Arab family, as a sensitive topic falling within the forbidden triad of this purposeful novelistic discourse, is the issue of restraint and clinging to what is not one's own, but it is a violation of another's personal freedom. However, despite she is still grieving her mother and brother loss due to the Western colonial war, specifically in Egypt, while her father remained suffering from his injury, Margaret exhibited some Middle Eastern habits. She repeatedly turns back to the world of reading and writing after every memory, as a refuge from the pressures of the strict family. Yet she finds Shahd at every turn, her only obstacle in Al-Mansour family, a tyrannical leader, both her and her mother, Umm Wahb.

She said with a soul longing for return to American exile once more: "Between Shahd and Umm Wahb, there is a strange alliance to suppress others' feelings. When Salwa, Wahb's wife, complains about some of his behaviours, they scold her as if disclosing some of her problems is a sin: 'Keep your secret, how can you talk about the father of your children in this way?' And since Shahd can only be a venomous viper, she adds: 'Complaining to anyone other than God is humiliation.' So Salwa closes her mouth as if she had received a slap on her lips."¹² (Al-Faruq, 2021, p. 15). Here, Salwa receives one form of verbal violence, where the woman becomes a silent, lifeless and rigid block.

Among the most prominent issues of violence against women, whether against her liberation as an educated woman contributing to society's intellectual richness, or a woman shattered by oppression, is addressed in the book by Algerian author Al-Sharif Jabilla on the theory of violence from a social perspective. He viewed woman's issue as an indispensable individual in contributing to and building the layers of society, documenting: "The contemporary Algerian novel has dealt with women from multiple perspectives, yet all agreeing on portraying her as a victim of social oppression and male injustice, and even her exclusion at extremists' hands. She appears in a world full of torment, sometimes attempting to rebel against it. Behind her stands the man, protecting his patriarchal system to protect his possessions, pushing the woman to remain confined inside the home and burdening her with the responsibility of preserving the progeny."¹³ (Jabilla, 2010, p. 210).

In this sense, Arab marginalization of women is due to the conservative family authority, which is rooted in patriarchal leadership, followed by the severe and admonitory leadership of women that aimed at preserving the inherited customary lineage. This dominance, particularly the authoritarian dynamic of subordination, is described in thematic criticism as 'prescriptive submissive' that forms the subterranean layer in which Fadila Al-Faruq emerges in her experimental Algerian novel *Territories of Fear*. She presented this event following Mary's divorce from Iyad whose mindset shifted from what it was in American exile to what it became after his return to his native Lebanon, his homeland, as if Shahd had entirely dissolved the bond that once united them. On the other hand, Mary's reconnection with her old friend Noah rekindles a deep relationship between them due to his kind-hearted masculinity. She travelled with him on a geo-military exploratory journey, after returning to her profession in journalism, investigation, and publishing. This journey aims to report on military conquests and unveil the wars and devastation plaguing the Middle East. The story's beginning was in Pakistan, where the lessons of an excessively religious man decree retribution against his wife's body chastity and modesty. If she was perceived to be heard, seen or spoken to a stranger man, then she is sentenced to have those body organs, with which she interacted, harshly severed. Thus, women falsely condemned in a court of tyranny and subjugation, serving as a testament to the oppression of women in our society.

Mary drastically recounted with shock and disbelief: "In Islamabad, Noah took me to a weird ridiculous court, where a man with a long beard and a white hat resembling the black hats of Jews sat there, whose shirt's whiteness was mixed with filth. He spoke angrily in his language, pointing to a woman with gouged-out eyes, a slashed nose, and cut ears, wrapped in a garment whose colour was close to a clear pink... where was a sad young man and a child about five years old near to her."¹⁴ (Al-Faruq, 2021, p. 73). In this context, the language of physical and psychological violence, deprivation, and harm was

¹² Al-Faruq, Fadila. (2021). *Territories of Fear*, A Novel. Today Publications, Setif, Algeria, p 15

¹³ Jabilla, Al-Sharif. (2010). *The Novel and Violence: A Socio-Psychological Study of the Contemporary Algerian Novel*, 1st ed., Modern Book World, Irbid, Jordan, p 210

¹⁴ Al-Faruq, Fadila. (2021). *Territories of Fear*, A Novel. Today Publications, Setif, Algeria, p 73

crystallized, illustrating how men authority crushes women. The tragedy is that the woman is powerless with no protection, not only before the law that imposes its tyranny upon her, it is, after all, the law of the state. Margaret confirmed, investigating the woman's case: "The man suspected his wife, thought she was betraying him with another man. So, he cut off her ears because he assumed she had listened with them, and gouged out her eyes because he assumed she had looked at him. He assumed this and that, and amputated what he amputated. Then he justified his horrible crime by saying that he was a Muslim whose duty was to eradicate the wrong deeds with his own hand, to earn Allah's satisfaction and save his honour.¹⁵" (Al-Faruq, 2021, p. 73).

This terrified scene is a prime manifestation of the backwardness and ignorance that has found in some Middle Eastern countries. It indicates the potential for religiosity to be falsified, deficient, and devoid of mercy. According to thematic and ideological criticism, which rejects bigotry, religious perspective should be broad, carrying conscious and progressively alert human understanding, not regressive and direct criminality. It should be adapted according to the principle of ease, not hardship; facilitation, understanding, and distance from rigid religiosity that issues arbitrary judgments, stripped of the tenets of Islamic law and the Prophetic lessons, thereby falling into the realm of heresy. Among Fadila Al-Faruq's prophecies in *Territories of Fear* is her recording of a "a self-split between two levels: consciousness/fear, registering the decline of consciousness' s dynamism and effectiveness in both history and the present. Within this same space, the self comes into contact with a second, free, and rational self, meaning that the law of the author's self, represented by consciousness, determines the path of its existence: the humanity and dignity of humankind against alienation and reification.¹⁶" (Boushleilha, 2022, p. 222).

Moreover, this theory balances fear and existence, within which many women's bodies were consumed across the Arab world, especially in the current situation with the suffering of occupied Palestine. Al-Faruq found the opportunity for verbal comparison through the language of the mutilated woman's body in the court of injustice, that symbolize slavery and terror; speaking of her with pity, pain, and a tenderness that rejects the existing brutality: "The disfigured lady, named Zahida, denied all accusations, yet the judge strangely requested witnesses to prove her innocence but he did not even ask her husband for witnesses to prove his accusation. Then he uttered the verdict... and suddenly the men's voices Allah is Great, Allah is Great). Zahida, whose features no longer remained, sentenced to life in eternal darkness, felt her way out, clinging to her brother's arm, and leaving the room searching for air. Her child, who was not aware of the fate of his mother nor his own, clung to her clothes. After that trial, he was no longer his father's son; he had become a son of fornication, as his father claimed.¹⁷" (Al-Faruq, 2021, p. 73-74). This confirms the idea of restriction, intimidation, and phobia on the familial and social levels, that resembles a phenomenon echoing the ancient tradition of burying girls alive, because they were viewed as a mark of disgrace. Within a continuously renewing context, the theory of patriarchal ideology of dominant masculinity takes shape, shackling the Arab women, whether Muslim or Arab Christian; the former oppressed by an oppressive and extremist husband, the latter oppressed by a conservative family controlled by both mother-in-law and sister-in-law.

Al-Faruq insisted on her rebellion by narrating ideas, dialects, actions, and social behaviours through the language of dress, morality, and religious conviction, all of which were charged with intertwined ideological, cultural, and religious belief structures. At the core of this thematic presentation is a discursive discourse that rejects the idea of coercion and domination over women and calls for respect toward all forms of womanhood, the foundation of the nation and the source of new generations. In addition, she called for gentleness rather than aggression, fairness rather than injustice, and humanity rather than excess; principles upon which all beliefs and religions agree, in both letter and spirit, in appraising freedom and humanity. From the foregoing, divergence and fragmentation bloom in the heart of religious themes, such as the punishment inflicted upon Zahida. It is a terrible upheaval through which "obscurantism and dogmatism, and politics disguised as religion, prevail. Leaders and princes emerge with no real qualifications except degrees of extremism, obsession, and cruelty. Every detail of ordinary life becomes a justification for killing brutally, from thinking differently to newspapers, books, and television, all facets of life, even bathrooms which became forbidden for women. In this dark, tragic space, cycles of horror succeed one another in an escalating crisis until they reach their peak.¹⁸" (Shattah, 2014, p. 208).

In such a religious system, nudity was condemned and modesty was demanded, the 'Other' appears peaceful, yet the alternative offered to women is violence, humiliation, and symbolic death. Zahida appears true to her name (meaning 'ascetic' or 'devout'); she is indeed chaste and plunged into an utter darkness due to an ignorant man. Margaret and Noah whispered to each other in a voice burdened by truth: "And besides, Noah whispered to me, "a sentence of stoning to death could have

¹⁵ Al-Faruq, Fadila. (2021). *Territories of Fear*, A Novel. Today Publications, Setif, Algeria, p 73

¹⁶ Boucheliha, Abdelwahab. (2022). *Balconies of the Text: Readings in the Maghrebian Novel*, 1st ed., Ibn al-Nadim for Publishing & Distribution, Oran, Algeria; Cultural Tributaries Publishers, Beirut, Lebanon, p 222

¹⁷ Al-Faruq, Fadila. (2021). *Territories of Fear*, A Novel. Today Publications, Setif, Algeria, p 73-74

¹⁸ Shattah, Abdullah. (2014). *Orbits of Terror: The Space of Violence in the Novels of the Black Decade*, Laf Press, Algeria, p 208

followed Zahida had her husband not disfigured her, so the judge considered that punishment sufficient for her. Many women in Pakistan have their eyes gouged out because of suspicion, and sometimes they are killed. After crimes like these, the stature of those murderous men grows, more hairs of honour sprout in their beards, and they become of spotless reputation, walking arrogantly.¹⁹” (Al-Faruq, 2021, p. 74). Thus, arrogance, audacity, and vanity cloak the man who played a heroic role endorsed by arbitrary, hollow, and immature authorities in their constitution.

What protects women’s femininity and dignity is the veil (al-hijab), as an obligation, not a shortcoming, in our Islamic religion, aimed at shielding her from harm. Yet the novel depicts the woman as a shackled body yearning for freedom: she also longs to escape fear, coercion, and intellectual stagnation, which are conditions devoid of compassion, mercy, and human decency. In this sense, Zahida became a symbolic ransom for countless women executed under the roofs of homes stripped of life’s joy, her mutilation accumulating into overwhelming psychological torment.

The issue of intimidating and abusing women psychologically and physically in the Middle East rooted in different inherited traditions: on one hand, adultery accusations; on the other hand, religious coercion (such as a Muslim sister-in-law attempts to convert her brother’s Christian wife to Islam). In this sense, the new language, as a thematic symbolic signifier, touches upon the symmetry with the Zionist entity’s actions in Gaza, in how weak women and their children are targeted, through linking Islamic origins with the historical roots of different customs and beliefs. Additionally, Al-Faruq did not neglect in her novel, which chronicles oppression, the enormity of rape, as it was described by Ali Ismail (2017) as: “a dangerous detail: rape and female’s oppression in our societies. In this context, the female means the human beings who lose their dignity, exactly as freedoms are raped, this man has raped his wife.²⁰” (p. 227). Although he is her own husband, yet he raped her by mutilating her body’s organs that belong solely to her own human body.

The themes of oppressing women through restraint amidst the complexities of war appear in Mary’s journey with Noah, in a new scene arousing suspicion and perplexity:

“My exhaustion had prepared me for that life of luxury, the truth is, I belonged to the journalists’ group who is fighting to change the reality of the Third World for the better by supporting women and improving their living conditions. But the wave of misguided religiosity was pushing them back into their old burrows, and wars’ horror drove people into different shells of fear. Everything was moving against the current we were swimming in. Then came my father’s and family’s death, and irrational love affair with Iyad, which instead of leading me out from the tunnel of grief to a safety, he led me to a strange crossroads.²¹” (Al-Faruq, 2021, p. 71-72).

From the beginning, these paths paved the way for her separation from Iyad and her attachment to Noah, who was later arrested and vanished without a trace during their journey to Baghdad, where Americans besieged all borders and detained every suspect, especially since he belonged to an anti-terrorism investigation unit. It seems he was eliminated, while women remain in states of suspension, in a shell filled with ambiguity and confinement, represented by Beirut, Egypt, Baghdad, Pakistan, etc. Notable among them are some religious women living in wealth but lacking openness, not introversion, and many Salafist men who unjustly accuse honourable women of misconduct and denying their virtue.

The main aim of this discussion, as an objective of importance on both religious and transactional levels, is to promote humility among women themselves and reject the masculine oppression of the female. In this sense, the Arab women are in dire need of a scientific, intellectual, and cultural renaissance that intelligently sharpens and develops their skills, enabling them to express their voices her through science, knowledge, and writing against different systems of irrational intimidation and terror. To this end, a woman must be a human being before being a responsibility.

Conclusion

To conclude, the main findings derived from the novel of Fadila Al-Faruq’s *Territories of Fear*, through the lens of thematic criticism, are summarized as follows:

- This novel’s events serve as prophecies materialized in the reality of today’s Middle East. From a religious perspective, there are sectarian conflicts among Islamic denominations, such as Sunni and Shi’a, which continue to ignite devastating wars. Also, it impacts other religions like Christianity, each with its own distinct faith, customs, and ideologies. The Arab woman remains a central participant and, at times, a victim. She becomes encircled, restrained, or subdued, some are manipulated and shackled, becoming fettered either for the purpose of oppression and intimidation, or because of extremism and criminality.
- The novel’s journey leads readers through continuously renewing historical and geographical settings, as they are instinctual. These spiritual, political and existential journeys reveal the deep relationship between geopolitical conflict and religious discourse in the contemporary Middle East. Here emerges the powerful role of language: Margaret’s voice from the American exile stands alongside the linguistic, ideological, and cultural frameworks embedded in inherited Arab

¹⁹ Al-Faruq, Fadila. (2021). *Territories of Fear*, A Novel. Today Publications, Setif, Algeria, p 74

²⁰ Ali Ismail, Azzouz. (2017). *Pain in the Arab Novel*, 1st ed., Crow Publishing & Distribution, Cairo, Egypt, p 227

²¹ Al-Faruq, Fadila. (2021). *Territories of Fear*, A Novel. Today Publications, Setif, Algeria, p 71-72

traditions. This inheritance appears fractured under the ashes of American and Zionist occupation, and the rise of rigid Salafist extremism. Through this mosaic, the woman became a comparative lens, by her speech, body and memory forming a bridge between clashing cultures and fragmented identities.

- The novel's subject exposes a phenomenon rejected across some religions, as it is a shared taboo: the grievance concerning the hostage, who is the Arab woman whom Muslim society has contained by casting suspicions on her dignity and honesty, thereby rendering her mutilated in her body's structure, a subject exposed to pain and sorrow. This constitutes a psychological and physical violation of both her beauty and her self-confidence. The Quranic verse: "So he called her from below her: Do not grieve" (Maryam: 24), becomes illuminated here, which resonates profoundly, as modern medicine confirms how pain and sorrow, with their associated hormones, can plunge a woman into early despair (menopause). This points the wisdom, eloquence, and miraculous nature of the Qur'anic revelation.
- Brutality stripped of human intelligence, which has been manifested as ignorance and cruelty, continues to shape social habits of blame, accusation, and displacement. However, this does not imply unchecked permissiveness or moral chaos, for the individual is bound by innate disposition. Laws exist to bridge gaps, especially in sensitive subjects like religion, without infringing upon Islamic legal prohibitions. Islam maintains clear boundaries that must not be violated or governed by humility, reverence, and restraint. Thus, debates that seek to challenge or deny these foundations are often futile, for their principles are established in the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah. Such principles require a climate of acceptance rather than aversion, because they are rooted in obligation, not choice.
- Human beings are divinely guided by and directed in the obligatory worship of Allah, without negligence, with compassion extended to the ill, the traveller, and the struggler. However, in their dealings with one another, among whom some are virtuous, others toxic; they are free, but tasked for choosing the best course. Thus, compliance in divine matters and free choice in human interactions are two fundamental conditions at the heart of every subject. This follows deliberation characterized by comprehensiveness and scrutiny which ensure the preservation of public safety for both family and society.

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